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ABSTRACT

Students have a right to use the dialect and language of their own cultural heritage. Language and dialect rights have many advantages for the user, including prestige, self-confidence, group identity, opportunity to project personality and style, appreciation and respect of cultural heritage, and self-awareness. All dialects are equal and are suited to the habits and needs of the users. However, schools need to give students the opportunity to learn Standard American English (SAE) as well by using exemplary teaching materials and techniques, sympathetic teachers, and motivational techniques. Some positive language strategies and attitudes that allow teaching SAE without having to eradicate dialects include comparing or contrasting grammatical features of SAE with dialects; using written assignments to eliminate dialect interference; emphasizing aspects of writing other than syntax, spelling, and punctuation at the beginning of the writing process; using role-playing; reinforcing the correct usage of SAE through grading without tearing down nonstandard usage; and regularly scheduling student/teacher conferences. (TJ)

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STUDENTS' LANGUAGE RIGHTS

by Edward Anderson

Persons' use of language does influence and very often drastically affects their success in a given social, cultural and especially occupational environment. They often feel a definite need to speak and to write in Standard American English or Edited American English, yet they also feel obliged to use their dialects as well as other aspects of their rhetorical, linguistic and cultural heritages. Often the question is posed as to what should be done about the dialect and the language of students who come from a wide variety of economic, cultural and social backgrounds, mainly and especially minority American groups.

Students should have the right to use the dialect and the language of their own cultural heritage. There is a definite need for all instructors and other educators to give more respect to these language and dialect rights of all students. Students should have the language and the dialect rights for many of the following advantages: prestige, self-confidence, ease, group identity, pride, opportunity to project personality and style, group solidarity, opportunity to develop language fluency, appreciation and respect of their own cultural and language heritages, self-awareness, self-assertion, conformity to language usage mainly in educational activities and the classroom environment, perpetuation of the language heritage, practice in the use of language skills, cohesiveness, unity, and the feeling of brotherhood.

It is evident that our students use their own dialects most of the day, and they use the school dialect only a part of the day. However, as these students train for preparation for future work and occupational

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endeavors in America's dominant mainstream society, in most instances and for reasons over which they have no control; they will have to conform to the language and the dialect of the mainstream American society--Standard American English or Edited American English. Professor Geneva Smitherman in her book Talkin and Testifyin--The Language of Black America points this fact out in the following statements:

> What linguist Donald Lloyd has labeled the 'national mania for correctness' stems from a long-standing tradition of elitism in American life and language matters....
>
> Though Americans preach individualism and class mobility, they practice conformity and class stais. The individual pioneer spirit is held in check by the need to keep up with the Joneses.[1]

No attempt should be made in the school to eradicate the diverse cultural,ethnical, regional, and social dialects of our students (which is a main part of their heritages), but only should there be effort put on having the students acquire a new and more acceptable dialect (SEA or EAE) which most of them have seen or heard and which they should have to use only when the need arises for economic and social reasons.

Since the Conference of College Composition and Communication statement of 1974 entitled "Students' Right To Their Own Language" was published, many teachers and other educators have either supported or rejected it. Yet one can not rightfully deny the validity and the soundness of the CCCC's resolution as it is presented in the following manner in the resolution's preface:

> We affirm the students' right to their own patterns and varieties of language--the dialects of their nurture and whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style. Language scholars long ago denied that the myth of a standard American dialect has any validity. The claim that any one dialect is unacceptable amounts to an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another. Such a claim leads to false advice for speakers and writers, and immoral advice for humans. A nation proud of its diverse heritage and its cultural and racial variety will preserve its heritage of dialects. We affirm strongly that teachers must have the experiences and training that will enable them to respect diversity and uphold the right of students to their own language.[2]

Sound information about the current and recent studies in dialectology points to the possitive outlook that should be considered when one speaks about diverse dialects and especially about the differences between Standard and Non-Standard American dialects used by many American minority group members. Professor Jay L. Robinson in his article "The Wall of Babel" brought to light many important linguistic facts that give his and many other linguists' support for the similarities between all dialects. He says that linguists believe all dialects are equal. He further makes the assertions with William Lobov (a noted linguist) and other linguists when he says:

> . . . . As linguistic systems, nonstandard dialects are not just equally systematic, but fundamentally similar to Standard English. The dialects differ in detail, to be sure, but not in kind; and because of their fundamental similarity nonstandard and standard are equal in their capacities to serve communicative, cognitive, and logical requirements.[3]

When this type of information is brought into consideration, there are very few, if any, legitimate reasons for denying Non-Standard dialect users access to full participation in our American society circles with the possibility of "success." "Success" in American society today comes mainly with job and economic mobility and social prestige among Standard American English users. There are and have been damaging criteria for this attainment for many years. Professor Smitherman points out the overall degrading effects that American language requirements have placed upon the so-called "success" of many of its inhabitants, mainly members of American minority groups:

> The speech of blacks, the poor, and other powerless groups is used as a weapon to deny them access to full participation in the society. Teachers harp on the 'bad' English of their students; potential employeres are denied jobs becuase they don't talk 'right'; future college graduates become force-outs becuase they write in 'nonstandard' English. Yet what is 'nonstandard' English is simply the language

> of 'nonstandard' people. Their linguistic usage deviates from the collective dialect of the dominant culture--nothing more, as simple amd yet as complex as that. For your language and the dialect in which it is actualized was acquired at around age two, pretty firmly fixed by about age five or six, and by adolescence your basic speech patterns have become a well-ingrained habit. Nearly impossible to change (except maybe over inordinately long periods of time--and then you have to be willing to surrender whole chunks of your identity to do so). What better weapon, then, with which to keep the outsiders out than the obstacle of speech?[4]

Non-Standard English users have been ridiculed and have not been given a chance to show their intellectual potential to function adequately especially in American society's intellectual world, social world, economic world, and in the job market. Professor Roger Shuy in his article "Language and Success" sees a reason for the denial of "success" in the job market and in the social and the political American circles:

> In clear terms of relationship of a person's use of language and employability, then, it can be concluded that it is dangerous to infer anything about a speaker's logic or intelligence on the basis of his use of the language. Far more revealing might be the person's social status, his education, or his geographical origins. Futhermore, however tempting it may be to use a propective employee's nonstandard grammar,pronunciation, and vocabulary as a sign of his motivation or trainability, chances are that all one can accurately infer is that the candidate has grown up on a nonstandard English speaking environment.[5]

The denial of students' langauge rights have been the product of the purist users of the English language who have concerned themselves with the preservation of an elite SEA or EAE and have disregared the development of American English and the existence of the rich variety of other American ethnical, social and regional dialects. Professor Smitherman refers to this fact when she says:

> Since all languages consist of dialect variations, and since the 'real' language is an abstraction, one may well ask; where does the notion of a national standard language come from? Although many people speak of the standard dialect in hallowed tones, there are <u>no</u> national standard languages wich are decreed from on high. Rather, one particular dialect of a language may get to be elevated over other variations due to an arbitrary decision by the speakers

> of that language. Well, not truly 'arbitrary,' since the dialect that becomes the standard is generally the same dialect spoken by those with political and economic poser. . . . what has evolved as today's national standard American English dialect is the dialect of those Americans of ceonomic and political power, namely, Anglo-saxon, Protestant middle and upper classes.[6]

Professor Richard W. Bailey in his article "Write Off Versus Write On" further tells how America has arrived at a national Standard Amderican English.

> ..... Unlike some other language communities, American has no aristocratic or metropolitan reference group speaking a standard dialect against which the national language can be measured, even though it has often yearned for one. 'It is an important object in this country,' wrote Noah Webster in 1843, ' to have a uniform national language, to which all foreigners settling in this country should conform. Since America has never had such a uniform national language, it has imagined one into existence in the name of correctness. This presumption of a national standard has had an important impact on American attitudes toward language by reinforcing the supposed connection between linguistic variation and social status, between being a 'real American' and a 'foreigner.'[7]

In American respectable instructors do not realize hos much language and dialect reflect the culture and the world view of its users. These instructors do not see that a group's language and dialect are suited to the habits and the needs of the users. A history of the American English language will show that as early years passed, American grammar merely tended to reflect or show early elitist grammatical usage and teneded to perpetuate the myth that language should never change.

The need for the respect of the students' right to their own language or dialect is evident; however, as has been presetned in this paper it is impossible in America for us to realistically keep students from or deny students the right to learn SAE or EAE as it has been so decreed by the elitists and the purists. Before teachers begin to teach SAE, the school must strive for a greater tolerence on the part of the public and the school community toward Non-Standard American English

dialects and for changing generally held negative attitudes and judgments about NSAE dialects. Many educators have attempted to use a variety of different ways to deal with the various diverse social, regional, ethnical, and racial dialects. Some educators-linguists advise trying to achieve dialect uniformity by eradicating all NSAE dialects; others try to gain dialect uniformity by teaching NSAE to SAE users; other allow students to use NSAE in school, and they do not attempt to change it; and finally others use bidialectalism in which students use NSAE and their home dialect with their friends and outside of school and in which the students use SAE in school with the students' being strongly encouraged to use SAE (the school language) most of the time in order to attain "success" statuses. All of these approaches have some drawbacks; however, I do encourage students to use their own dialects and to use SAE only when the need arises.

In order for us to respect the dialects of our diverse student population, SAE or EAE which is the form of American English acceptable in our schools and colleges, in most places of employment, and in most social circles must be approached in the classroom in different ways. New regard must be given to teaching techniques of this written language found in most of our printed matter and media to our minority students who use Non-Standard varieties of American English. Hence, SAE can be taught to those who do not use it only if certain conditions prevail. These conditions are exemplary teaching materials and techniques, able and sympathetic teachers, and high motivation on the part of the pupils themselves with such motivation being instilled in the students by the teachers. In this learning situation there must be no ridicule of the students' Non-Standard variety of American English.

Through the use of a number of motivational and stimulating approaches, methods, strategies, skills, and techniques students may be allowed to have the right to use their own dialects and language when whey still acquire a new dialect which is SAE or EAE. This policy helps us to introduce and to use positive langugage strategies and attitudes and keeps us from attempting to eradicate the much needed cultural heritage language medium which is the NSAE dialect variety. These approcahes also help the student gain economic mobility and social prestige in our American society which dictates that these students use a form of SAE or EAE.

One approach that instructors may use is comparing and/or Contrasting grammatical features of SAE and NSAE. Hence, in dealing with dialect interferences with SAE in written and in oral student work, instructors should concentrate upon one feature of a dialect at a time and concentrate upon the features that evoke negative responses in our American society, thereby, helping the students to substitute so-called prestigious grammar or features for the most stigmatized grammar or features of their established language patterns. Instructors should not make a random correction of all so-called dialect errors or dialect interferences, and they should not try to teach students as though they are teaching them a new language. However, the instructors should instead systematically compare and/or contrast the American dialects and give systematic instruction in how Americans convert from one dialect form to another form. Instructors may be called upon to translate between dialects and must have a clear understanding of the differences between the dialects. He or she should understand which forms are equal and be able to help

students learn to select SAE forms when the situation calls for these forms. The instructors must have an outstanding understanding of the grammatical and pronunciation patterns that his or her students use and of the ways in which SAE and NSAE differ. Instructors should not be overly subject to feel that they will give "success" in immediately eradicating a "bad" dialect that differs with SAE through the use of oral drills. Those programs based primarily upon oral drills have proven not to be overly successful, but elimination of dialect interferences can be achieved as we compare and/or contrast dialect features as they are presented in repeated written and oral student essays and short writing assignments. In keeping with the need for the respect for the students' rights to their own language, instructors must never feel impelled to eradicate old Non-Standard English systems and should not make the students ashamed of their older Non-Standard language or dialect.

The conventions of Edited American English syntax, spelling and punctuation should not be overly emphasized in the writing process and certainly not at the beginning of the writing process. Professor Thomas J. Farrell in his article "Differentiating Writing from Talking" further comments on this procedure when he says:

> . . . . Irregular written forms of syntax, spelling, and punctuation are to be expected and tolerated momentarity because there are some things beginning writers need to learn first that are more important than learning the regularized conventions of EAE. EAE is the laudible long-range goal of college composition courses because EAE is more readable than unconventional forms of writing, but the initial instruction of beginning writers needs to stress(1) developing ideas, (2) grouping similar ideas together, (3) presenting ideas in an order that can be readily followed by readers, and (4) generally anticipating the fictional audience's need to know what one means.[8]

Since most individuals who speak Non-Standard dialects generally attend open-admissions colleges, Mr. Farell suggests that these students be given their writing training in stages with the regularized conventions of writing being taught at a latter stage in the students' instruction. Mr. Farrell also suggested the importance of reading for the writing student, for he says that "that way they (students) will have gotten used to seeing the regularized form of EAE. Then when they read their own writing, they are more likely to see their deviations from regularized forms than they would be if they had not read regularly."[9] Students should have an extensive reading program of models of various types of writing so that they might become more familiar with Edited American English syntax, spelling and punctuation as these forms are used in these writing models which they pattern their writing after.

Role-playing is another technique that can be used in the classroom by getting Non-Standard dialect student users to learn new dialect patterns as they act out small dramatic situations. The students should not memorize the SAE parts of such people as reporters, policemen, salesmen, but they should spontaneously produce the lines. Classroom skits may also be written and presented to help students speak and act out realistic situations that are other than their usual role. Job related SAE oral or written projects may be assigned, such as reports, business letters, speeches to a certain group of job related people, and job interviews. Skits may also be presented by students who must give speech styles used by people of different backgrounds, different jobs, and different social classes, hence, allowing for the use of varying verbal and rhetorical styles. Students may exchange and act out new roles in the skits and, hence, switch styles as they do in real life (formal, intimate, casusal, frozen, consultative styles).

Also the manner in which student essays and papers are graded can have a profound impact upon the students' success with 'with SAE dialect and language and can give them more respect for the students' right to their own language. Teachers need to re-enforce the students' use of acceptable SAE, but not to tear down their Non-Standard usage in a harsh manner. These instructors need to give critical comments that teach SAE, give encouraging words which instructors write on papers when they place a grade on when or which they say to the students later in conferences, and give contructive suggestions for correcting assignments, such as ways to code-switch from NSAE to SAE. Instructors do not need to belittle the students' non-use of SAE. Students should revise all written work as soon as it is returned to them. This revision may involve minor corrections to a complete re-writing of a paper or written assignment. It is possible and highly desirable to grade one type of grammatical, mechanical or rhetorical item at a time on all of the papers of an entire class and later to direct classroom discussions around this area of written composition. A two grade procedure is also desirable for a number of written assignments, essays and papers. In this grading procedure one grade is given for grammar, mechanics and usage; and one grade is given for content organization, coherence and rhetorical matters.

Individual Student-Teacher Conferences based upon oral and written may be handled in a similar manner as the grading of papers is handled. Conferences are designed to help individual students with their personal written or oral language problems, and they should be regularly scheduled during the term as well as conducted on an as needed basis. Teachers

must reveal concerns with what the student is trying to say. Students must value the instructors as sympathetic, if critical,persons who expect themes to be individual and interesting. Otherwise, the students are likely to think of their conferences as help sessions say on punctuation, grammar, usage or mechanics and their themes as routine sets of grammatical sequences properly punctuated. This is not to say that teachers will have spent their conference time unwisely if much of it is devoted to grammar, dialect interferences or mechanics, but ordinarily the teachers have done better if they show the students how they failed to limit their subject, define their terms, arrange their materials or develop an idea convincingly. Constructive suggestions about how to eliminate dialect interferences can be lasting if the teacher goes about establishing some good methods for dealing with dialect code-switching. All students, not just weak or Non-Standard English users, should receive profit from individual student-teacher conferences. The well-planned conference does orally what the combination of marginal or terminal comments do in writing. These comments should not seek to embarrass NSAE speakers, but they should seek to aid them in theme revision and to teach them new things about composition through positive attitudes about dialect and language usage. Teachers of composition should realize that student writing of long papers is not always necessary or desirable; hence, short impromptu themes, an essay type of examination, or any sort of writing that gives practice will also give fluency or confidence, and, thus, it is greatly to be desired.

Students need to be given information about American dialect awareness, the development and history of SAE dialects, why Non-Standard dialects exist and should be tolerated, reasons for dialect differences, and the status of American dialects today.

Students may also write Journals in which they make daily entries, establishing their own writing format, writing style and fluency. The purpose of such an assignment is to help students to narrate, to constructively ramble, to describe, to interpret, to reflect upon their daily experiences, to get writing practice, to test their ideas and to shape segments of their daily experiences. The students are to be reminded that the Journal is not the same as a diary. Some of this journal writing may or may not be in the students' main dialect.

Verbal and rhetorical strategies that are used by many minority groups who speak NSAE dialects should be discussed and exemplified in the classroom for cultural and heritage sake. Provisions should be made for students to use their own dialects in class with some occasional shifting from SAE to NSAE.

As instructors seek to use a number of approaches in order to encourage and to give respect for the students' right to their own dialect and language, they should finally attempt to reach a new goal which is expressed by Professor Richard W. Bailey, one of the editors of Varieties of Present-Day English:

> Through the honesty of his persuasion, the teacher can create the setting for the student's growth in fluency and increased mastery of the written language. Only at the latest stages of this development will problems of usage, spelling, and the details of elite dialects of English have any place in the classroom. All teachers--and English teachers in particular--must act in full awareness of the problems of linguistic insecurity that confuse and discourage so many Americans in their use of language. Above all, he must recognize that his function is not to purify the language of his students but to extend it.[10]

NOTES

1. Geneva Smitherman, Talkin and Testifyin--The Language of Black America (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1977), p. 185.

2. "Students' Right to Their Own Language," College Composition and Communication, 25 (Special Issue, Fall 1974).

3. Jay L. Robinson, "The Wall of Babel," in Varieties of Present-Day English, eds. Richard W. Bailey and Jay L. Robinson (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1973), p. 424.

4. Smitherman, p. 199.

5. Roger Shuy, "Language and Success," in Varieties of Present-Day English, eds. Richard W. Bailey and Jay L. Robinson (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1973), p. 308.

6. Smitherman, pp. 194-195.

7. Richard W. Bailey, "Write Off Versus Write On," in Varieties of Present-Day English, eds. Richard W. Bailey and Jay L. Robinson (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1973, pp. 386-387.

8. Thomas J. Farrell, "Differentiating Writing from Talking," College Composition and Communication, 29(December, 1978), 348.

9. Ibid., p. 349.

10. Bailey, p. 408.

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